

# **DARK TWIST**

By

Philip Middleton Williams

# DARK TWIST

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DARK TWIST

*For the Class of 1971.*

## DARK TWIST

### **CHARACTERS:**

**RICHARD BARLOW:** Late thirties. Former student, now an English teacher.

**JEFF ARNOLD:** Late thirties. Former student, now a science teacher.

**JORGE SALAZAR:** Late sixties. Custodian.

**JIM ROBERTSON:** Early sixties. Veteran teacher and Dean of Faculty.

**A STUDENT:** Fourteen. Freshman.

### **PLACE and TIME:**

The study hall at St. Edmund's School, somewhere in New England. Late August.

### **PRODUCTION HISTORY:**

An earlier version of **DARK TWIST** was first presented in a staged reading by Actors Ensemble Theatre at the Nomad Theatre in Boulder, Colorado, on March 2, 1986. Roles were read by Will York, David Cleveland, Bill Higham, and Army Armstrong, with stage directions by Geri Busse.

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*The scene is the study hall in St. Edmund's School, a New England boarding school. The room is old and used. Up center is the front of the room where the proctor sits at a desk. The desk is mounted on a low dais. There is a blackboard on the wall behind the desk. On either side of the dais are arches leading out into a hall. To the left and right of the arches are large wooden plaques with names carved into them, dating as far back as fifty years. They hang like pictures. The stage left and stage right walls have windows in them. (At least one must be operable.) Beneath the stage right window is long window seat. The walls are divided by a wainscoting, painted light green above and dark green below. The paint is old, cracked, and peeling in spots. The room has five rows of desks. The desks are the kind in use in elementary schools in the late 1950's with the book storage area beneath the tops which opens up and a swivel seat attached to the base. There are as many desks as will fit on the stage and leave room for maneuvering. There are aisles between the rows of the desks. The desks themselves are worn and graffiti-strewn. The general feeling of the room is one of tiredness. It is used as a study hall, a meeting place, a movie theatre, and it has felt the tramp and tread of countless feet and haphazard care. The blackboard is scratched, and there is a layer of dust that is part of the furniture. At rise, it is mid-morning on a late August day. Sunlight is coming through the windows, the light milky from the dirt on the windows and the haze outside. JORGE SALAZAR, a man in his late sixties wearing a maintenance worker's uniform, is walking around the room, inspecting the furniture, wiping his hand across the surface of one of the desks, seeing the dust on the windowsills. He takes out a small notebook, writes something in it, puts the book back, and takes out a pack of chewing gum. He slowly unwraps a stick, careful to deposit the wrapper in a trash can, and thoughtfully starts to chew. He looks around the room again, and is about to leave when he hears footsteps and voices approaching from off-stage. RICHARD BARLOW enters. He is in his late thirties, dressed in prep casual: button-down shirt, khakis, and loafers, followed by JEFF ARNOLD, also late thirties, dressed similarly. They are both carrying bookbags.*

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**RICHARD.** So, I finally said, no, your daughter cannot play Sister Sarah Brown in Guys and Dolls. She can't act, and when she sang at her audition, three banshees got out of the business.

**JEFF.** Bet that went over well.

**RICHARD.** When I came back from spring break, the headmaster told me that my contract would not be renewed. Thank God; I was gonna quit anyway and go back to selling windows and doors. (*Richard looks around the room and sees Jorge.*)

Hello. (*Jorge nods and silently offers Richard a stick of gum.*) No, thanks. (*Jorge shrugs and exits.*) Oh, hail to thee, St. Edmund's, famed in song and story... Place hasn't changed.

**JEFF.** It seems smaller than I remember it.

**RICHARD.** It's all relative. You were a lot smaller twenty years ago.

**JEFF.** No, I'm pretty much the same size as I was then.

**RICHARD.** Well, then, maybe it has something to do with the time/space continuum.

**JEFF.** That doesn't even make sense.

**RICHARD.** How should I know? You're the physicist. You explain it.

**JEFF.** It's uglier, too.

**RICHARD.** Holy Ned has not aged well. (*Jeff wanders over to the plaques.*)

Your name is up there: Senior Prefect Allen Oscar Arnold. I'm impressed, Jeff.

**JEFF.** So am I. Proof that you may not be able to fool all of the people all of the time, but you can keep them guessing.

**RICHARD.** I'm sorry I missed it. That would have been fun to see you running Student Council meetings, all serious and shit. Of course, you would never have lived up to the reputation of the guy who was Senior Prefect the year I was here.

**JEFF.** Robert Deacon Alexander.

**RICHARD.** As I recall, when he wasn't scoring touchdowns, shooting three-pointers, and sucking up to the faculty for letters of recommendation to Yale and Harvard, he was screwing anyone – male or female – between the ages of fourteen and forty who smiled at him. That was the rumor, anyway. I never really knew all the inside scoop. Spoooges were left out of that kind of gossip.

**JEFF.** Spoooge?

**RICHARD.** I was a spoooge. One of the outs. That would have been me. (*Beat.*) So, how did you do as Senior Prefect? (*Richard goes to the desk on the dais and drops his bag on it. He sits in the chair.*)

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**JEFF.** I don't remember.

**RICHARD.** That well, huh?

**JEFF.** To be honest, I don't remember my last two years here.

**RICHARD.** Seriously?

**JEFF.** Well, I can remember some things, like incidents and certain people, but the whole thing... it isn't there.

**RICHARD.** Damn. I'm glad I left when I did.

**JEFF.** So am I.

**RICHARD.** Gee, thanks.

**JEFF.** I didn't mean it that way. You were smart. You made a good move.

**RICHARD.** Ironic to hear that flunking out of a prep school was a smart move.

*(Richard gets up from the desk and walks among the student desks. He stops at one.)* This was it. This was my desk. My initials are probably carved in here somewhere. I sat here day and night for almost a year. Remember how it went? If your grades weren't above a certain GPA, you went to study hall, and I was assigned to study hall during every free period for the entire school year. I loved it. I read, I wrote, I daydreamed. Anything but study. I must have read *The Great Gatsby* ten times that year. I could recite passages from memory. I still can. When I wasn't doing that, I wrote short stories, letters that were never sent, and there was a period of time when I spent several nights trying to find rhymes for words that they said wouldn't rhyme, like "orange." That was my escape. It may not seem like much, but when you're a scrawny little geek with thick glasses, the complexion of a pizza, and a nickname derived from an article of clothing, anything that took me away from here was a blessing.

**JEFF.** Dickie. It's not such a bad name.

**RICHARD.** Then you are welcome to it. No one has called me that since I left here. Not even my family.

**JEFF.** Why?

**RICHARD.** Because when you are fifteen years old and very aware of the fact that you're gay, being called little Dickie is a little too on the nose, okay? Fortunately, thanks to good genetics, I was able to grow out of it, shall we say.

**JEFF.** Okay, I get it.

**RICHARD.** Yeah. It's Richard. Speaking of nicknames, how did you get Jeff out of Allen Oscar Arnold?

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**JEFF.** Allen from my father, Oscar from my grandfather. Jeff was from my mother who thought that a baby with either name sounded too affected. Maybe she thought it was manly. Little did she know.

**RICHARD.** And you've never used the real names.

**JEFF.** Well, on things like my driver's license and diplomas, yes. But no one's ever called me Allen more than once, and it's usually the lady at the DMV.

**RICHARD.** I thought people from Darien, Connecticut were proud of their names; names like Brandon or Hunter or Stewart... Sometimes all at once. Brandon Hunter Stewart.

**JEFF.** It helps if it's followed by a Roman numeral. Brandon Hunter Stewart the Third.

**RICHARD.** A three-sticks, huh?

**JEFF.** I know a guy who's an eighth.

**RICHARD.** Seriously?

**JEFF.** Henry Wadsworth Thompson Vee-Eye-Eye-Eye.

**RICHARD.** Henry the Eighth. How many wives?

**JEFF.** The usual; the trial run, and then the real one with the rich father and the house in Palm Beach. We called him Harry Eight. (*Jeff goes to the desk, looks around, stops at one.*) This was mine.

**RICHARD.** Why did you have a desk? You could have studied in your room. Your grades were good.

**JEFF.** I had Pete. Remember him?

**RICHARD.** Oh, yeah...

**JEFF.** Peter MacGregor Lockhart. Hyperactive. People in the room day and night, partying, talking, playing music.

**RICHARD.** And here I thought you were the center of that.

**JEFF.** So did everyone else. So did I, for a while. But I remember one weekend when there was a football game. Everybody went out to cheer on the team. The dorm was empty. On the way out, though, I went past your room and heard music. You were in there listening to records by yourself. I stood outside your door for almost three minutes trying to get up the nerve to knock. I really envied you your privacy.

**RICHARD.** Do you remember the album?

**JEFF.** Sergeant Pepper's. Second side.



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**RICHARD.** I still have that album. Vinyl forever. But you didn't knock; you went out to the game. I could see the field from my room. I saw you out there, hanging out with the rest of the guys. People liked you, Jeff. You were popular. (*Jeff shrugs.*) Did you know I was coming back to teach here?

**JEFF.** No, I didn't know.

**RICHARD.** Surprised you?

**JEFF.** Yeah. I would have thought this would be the last place you'd want to teach.

**RICHARD.** I'm surprised you remembered me. (*He goes back to the proctor's desk and sits.*) For the life of me, I can't remember the name of the teacher who sat here on Wednesday nights. He was short, kind of bald, had a rather nice face. Taught French to the upperclassmen.

**JEFF.** Portis.

**RICHARD.** Portis. That's it. He drove a red Honda. One night he noticed that I was deep into Gatsby, and he probably noticed that I had been reading it for a month. He got up and came down to my desk.... (*Richard gets up and walks down to his student desk.*) Leaned over and said in a whisper, "Is that an assignment, Mr. Barlow?" (*He sits at the student desk, looking up at the imaginary Mr. Portis.*) I mumbled, "No, sir." I waited for him to do or say something. Instead, he smiled, patted me on the shoulder, went back and sat down. (*He returns to the proctor's desk.*) I never forgot that moment of kindness.

**JEFF.** Just his name. He died a year later.

**RICHARD.** How?

**JEFF.** Rolled his car. He was shitfaced.

**RICHARD.** I'm sorry to hear that. But I do remember some of the other teachers. Mr. Dodd.

**JEFF.** Algebra. Retired ten years ago.

**RICHARD.** Mr. Mead.

**JEFF.** Earth science. Fired for smoking pot in his apartment.

**RICHARD.** Mr. Deane.

**JEFF.** History. Chewed rubber bands every time he tried to give up smoking.

**RICHARD.** I hated him.

**JEFF.** Me too.

**RICHARD.** Is he dead yet?

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**JEFF.** Hardly. He interviewed me for a job at the school where he's now the headmaster. I didn't get the job, obviously.

**RICHARD.** Why? He carries some sort of grudge against you? What for?

**JEFF.** No, I turned him down. I just couldn't see myself working for him. And if you're going to have someone around from your past, it's a good idea to have them on your side.

**RICHARD.** He loved to torment me in class.

**JEFF.** I remember. Better you than me.

**RICHARD.** Oh, gee, thanks.

**JEFF.** You were an easy target. Or easier, at least. Anything he didn't do to you he did to the rest of us.

**RICHARD.** It would have helped if I'd have occasionally done an assignment.

**JEFF.** Not just that. You were different. You stood out. You were from someplace else. You had an accent.

**RICHARD.** Accent? I'm from Ohio. We don't have accents. What about his Beacon Hill drawl? What about yours?

**JEFF.** You were the only kid from your town. From your state. There were three other guys in our class from Darien. I fit in.

**RICHARD.** (*With Boston Brahmin accent.*) Tell me, Mr. Arnold, how many troops did the Union Army have at Shiloh?

**JEFF.** (*Chuckling.*) Yeah, he sounded exactly like that.

**RICHARD.** (*Continuing with the accent.*) Sounded like what, sir? I've asked a question: how many Union soldiers fought in the battle of Shiloh?

**JEFF.** (*A bit startled but picking up on the game.*) Uh, I don't recall.

**RICHARD.** Beg pardon?

**JEFF.** I don't recall, sir.

**RICHARD.** And why not?

**JEFF.** Uh...

**RICHARD.** Could it be that we didn't finish our little assignment last night? Forgive me, Mr. Arnold. Forgive me, class. I had no idea that an assignment of such great magnitude would impose such a burden that you would find it impossible to finish. Or start. Now, was it that difficult?

**JEFF.** No, sir, I just –

**RICHARD.** Mr. Powell, did you finish the assignment? Good. Mr. Block? Good. Mr. Ames? Excellent. Mr. Barlow? Mr. Barlow? Don't blush, Mr. Barlow, I'm

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sure you had time to finish the assignment. No? Hmm. It seems that you and Mr. Arnold have something in common, don't you think, eh? Mr. Arnold, will you please take out the textbook and discover the answer to the question. Hands down, class, let him squirm on his own. Mr. Barlow. Come here please. Now. Why didn't you finish the assignment? Ah, your algebra. You were trying to finish that. Now, which do you consider to be more important: history or algebra? Oh, you do, eh? Been having a bit of trouble with the old quadratic equation, are we? Didn't they teach you that back in Iowa? Oh, excuse me; Ohio. Well, Mr. Barlow, I think you'd better consider rearranging your priorities. We here at St. Edmund's have a lot of expectations for our students. Frankly, I don't see how you're going to measure up to them if you don't work at getting first things first. You won't amount to much more than being an auto mechanic if you don't. Sit down. Mr. Arnold, what is the answer? (*Beat. Richard shakes his head as if to vanquish the memory.*)

**JEFF.** God, I remember that.

**RICHARD.** Not exactly word for word, but close enough to still keep me awake at night.

**JEFF.** He was a shit. Still is. During our interview he asked me what I knew about Herman Melville. I told him that unless Melville won the Nobel Prize for physics, I didn't know anything about him.

**RICHARD.** Melville? For God's sake. Melville was an obsessive little man with a knack for stretching metaphors and a hankering for well-built young men.

**JEFF.** How Deane ever got to be a headmaster is beyond me.

**RICHARD.** I think it was him who made up my mind for me.

**JEFF.** To do what?

**RICHARD.** To prove him wrong. Goddam if it wasn't his sneering little remark and wimpy face that came back to me every time I thought about quitting grad school. When you get right down to it, I have that little shit to thank for the drive to get my PhD. Don't ever tell him that.

**JEFF.** Secret's safe with me.

**RICHARD.** I'd love to walk up to him some day and say (*Assuming a hillbilly accent.*) How ya doin' Deaneo, ya old fart. Remember me? Little Dickie? Well, it's Dr. Richard Barlow now. By the way, didja ever go back for your masters? No? Sorry 'bout that. Guess it takes rearranging our priorities, don't it?

**JEFF.** You'd do that, wouldn't you?

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**RICHARD.** In my dreams. In reality, I'd be polite and he'd be the same as he always was. And as we said goodbye, we'd both shake our heads and wonder what became of each other. (*Jeff goes to the blackboard and picks up a piece of chalk. He begins to draw a complex atomic structure.*) What are you doing?

**JEFF.** Dr. Hawley.

**RICHARD.** (*Terry-Thomas accent.*) I say, old chap, do you mind awfully if I ask what the bloody hell you're playing at?

**JEFF.** (*Same accent.*) By Jove, I'd be absolutely delighted to explain. (*Gesticulating wildly.*) Now, this is the proton... or is it the neutron? Doesn't matter, it's all in the textbook. Now, you chaps had better get this down because it will be on the next examination, eh what? Now, here is the basis of life, of all existence, of all matter... and of all anti-matter, for that matter. Oh, I say, small joke there. Haw.

**RICHARD.** Ah, good one. (*Jeff puts down the chalk. Beat.*) Go on, you nailed him.

**JEFF.** I liked him.

**RICHARD.** He was a pompous old man who was denied tenure at Harvard.

**JEFF.** I did well in his class.

**RICHARD.** You liked someone because you got good grades from him?

**JEFF.** No. I liked him because he knew his stuff and he taught it well. I learned from him. I learned to understand science, and his class in physics was a revelation to me. His letter of recommendation got me into college, and his encouragement got me into grad school. When he decided to retire last year, he recommended me for the job. And here I am.

**RICHARD.** That was it? You gave up a six-figure income with a major defense contractor because the poster child for absent-minded professors asked you to? You owe him that much?

**JEFF.** This place is insulated. It's secure.

**RICHARD.** It's a boarding school for the one-percent, founded on the traditions and ideals as old and as bigoted as the best times of the Victorian era. It is one of the last all-boys schools in the country. None of these boys will ever have to work a day in their life if they don't want to. It has no contact with reality.

**JEFF.** Well, I have had my fill of reality. I've spent the last ten years working on nuclear weapons research. I may not remember the body count at Shiloh, but I can tell you exactly how many grams of plutonium it will take to blow up any given

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city. It got so that I could be quite entertaining at cocktail parties, amusing the guests with numbers and statistics regarding death and destruction that were quite staggering. I have a high security clearance, and the honor of being interrupted in the middle of getting laid by a midnight call from the White House. And then...*(Beat.)*

**RICHARD.** And then...?

**JEFF.** I was working at our lab out at Los Alamos in New Mexico. I had a nice little house; I was even starting to have a social life again. One day I took a trip to a nearby Native American site called Bandelier. There, less than five miles from the birthplace of the atomic bomb and weapons that could end life on this planet in one big bang, were the remains of a civilization that was older than Christianity. Two days later, Dr. Hawley called and told me he was retiring and the job was mine if I wanted it. I considered it a sign. And a little Victorian tradition sounds very comforting now.

**RICHARD.** How long will you stay?

**JEFF.** Until I'm ready to go back. I'm on indefinite leave. What about you?

**RICHARD.** No more than three years, tops.

**JEFF.** Why only three?

**RICHARD.** I came here as a freshman, expecting to graduate in four years. I left after one. I have some unfinished business here.

**JEFF.** You're wasting your time. Most of the people who were here twenty years ago are gone.

**RICHARD.** You're here. James Gilman Robertson is still here. Besides, the score I have to settle isn't with someone else. It's with me. I don't like to lose.

**JEFF.** You're teaching English.

**RICHARD.** Yep.

**JEFF.** But you have a PhD in theatre, right?

**RICHARD.** *(Deadpan.)* I'm a doctor of theatre. I can cure a ham.

**JEFF.** *(Chuckling.)* Ah, good one. But I never imagined you as a theatre person. Acting and all that.

**RICHARD.** No, I never trod the boards after undergrad. My degree is in playwriting and dramatic lit. But there's not a lot of steady work for a playwright. I'd have better luck getting a job as a shepherd. Besides, to this place, English and theatre, it's all the same. Words, words, words.

**JEFF.** I don't remember you doing theatre here.

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**RICHARD.** I didn't. But I love to read and write. That's all I needed. I'm not the scientific kind. There's more to things than what can be explained in purely scientific terms. I like to explore not only how we communicate, but why.

**JEFF.** That's a good reason, I suppose.

**RICHARD.** I always thought you'd be an artist. You played the piano. I remember walking in on you practicing. Do you still play?

**JEFF.** Every now and then.

**RICHARD.** You gave up a career as the next Vladimir Horowitz?

**JEFF.** I was closer to the guy with a tip jar in an airport lounge.

**RICHARD.** So why, besides Dr. Hawley, did you trade that for the lab?

**JEFF.** It's concrete. In science, we deal with facts. Either something is true or false.

**RICHARD.** A world of absolutes. In my world of theatre, there are none. Or at least we like to think so. When did you last teach in a classroom?

**JEFF.** Grad school.

**RICHARD.** This will be different. High school is nothing like college. Trust me.

**JEFF.** How do you teach?

**RICHARD.** Forty percent out of a textbook, forty percent improvisation, and ten percent crowd control.

**JEFF.** You left out ten percent.

**RICHARD.** No, that's up to the kids. They have to do some of it on their own. If they expect it all to be delivered on a platter, they're in for a bit of a shock.

**JEFF.** Okay. Show me.

**RICHARD.** Huh?

**JEFF.** Teach me something. (*Jeff goes to one of the desks, sits, and slouches like a disconsolate student. Stoner voice.*) So, uh, Doc, why do we gotta learn this stuff? (*Richard grins, then goes to the blackboard, picks up the eraser, and tosses it to Jeff. He is caught off guard so he bobbles it but catches it.*)

**RICHARD.** (*In teacher mode.*) What just happened?

**JEFF.** Huh?

**RICHARD.** C'mon, Mr. Arnold. What just happened?

**JEFF.** You threw an eraser at me and I caught it.

**RICHARD.** That's right. But how did you catch it? Can you describe the process that your brain went through in the instant that your eyes saw the eraser hurtling

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toward you and sent the signal to your brain, and engaged the muscles in a coordinated series of movements to snatch the object out of the air?

**JEFF.** It was a reflexive –

**RICHARD.** Stay in character.

**JEFF.** I dunno.

**RICHARD.** Well, class, we're going to find out. We're going to examine in great detail one of the deepest mysteries of mankind: the human brain's extraordinary ability to learn patterns to the degree that it requires no conscious effort to do something very complicated. Does a wide receiver think about every move he makes while catching a pass and running for a touchdown as the crowd goes wild? Does a dancer think of her every move while dancing Swan Lake? Of course not. The conscious mind would be so inundated with traffic control and instructions that the simple act of walking upstairs would render us blithering idiots. Well, language is like that. It's something that we hope by this stage in life would require little conscious effort. (*Richard goes over to Jeff and without warning raps him on the head with his knuckles.*)

**JEFF.** Shit! What'd you do that for?

**RICHARD.** Proves my point. Your reaction was reflexive. Up until that very moment, you had no idea you were going to say "shit." You used language the same way you used your muscles in catching that eraser. When the stimulus was there, you reacted.

**JEFF.** That hurt.

**RICHARD.** Got your attention, though, didn't it, Mr. Arnold? So, we are going to explore the English language. Bring it out from the deep, dark world of the unconscious and into the bright light of day where we can explore all the complexities and nooks and crannies that make the written word and creative expression the one thing that separates humanity from all other forms of life. We may even read *The Great Gatsby*. (*Beat. Back to himself.*) How was that?

**JEFF.** A novel approach.

**RICHARD.** Ah, good one.

**JEFF.** If you conk some kid on the head every day, you might get somewhere. Words like "stimulus" and "reflexive" might throw them off.

**RICHARD.** Dictionaries are a wonderful resource. How will you teach?

**JEFF.** I doubt I'll be conking my students on the head, even if it's teaching Newton's laws.

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**RICHARD.** For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. English and Physics aren't that far apart after all.

**JEFF.** Remember the best part of Dr. Hawley's class?

**RICHARD.** I never had him. Earth Science with the stoner.

**JEFF.** He taught in such a way that you'd think he was discovering it for the first time. He must have taught the same stuff over and over for forty years, but it never got stale. He was like a kid exploring in the woods, and it was contagious. I got the same feeling of wonderment. Science was never cold and distant. It was like life itself.

**RICHARD.** So is theatre. We're not so different, you and I. (*Richard opens the desk drawer and pulls out the contents. paper clips, a pen, perhaps.*) So, last night at the cocktail party you mentioned you were divorced.

**JEFF.** Yes.

**RICHARD.** I'm sorry.

**JEFF.** (*Shrug.*) It's for the best for both of us.

**RICHARD.** How'd you meet her?

**JEFF.** I hit her car with my car.

**RICHARD.** Met by accident, huh.

**JEFF.** Ah, good one. I was pulling out of an alley. My view was blocked by a truck. I thought I was in the clear, but I didn't see her coming and took out about two feet of her right front fender. I only broke my turn signal. I still got cited. We exchanged information about insurance, and one thing led to another, and ...

**RICHARD.** How long were you married?

**JEFF.** Four years.

**RICHARD.** Kids?

**JEFF.** No.

**RICHARD.** Can I ask what happened?

**JEFF.** I came out.

**RICHARD.** Oh. That must have been awkward. You were, what...?

**JEFF.** Thirty. She said she knew it all along and she didn't want me to keep up the appearances for just her sake. We're still very close.

**RICHARD.** Where is she now?

**JEFF.** Santa Barbara.

**RICHARD.** Are you seeing anyone?



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**JEFF.** No. I'm not into the scene, if that's what they still call it. A few dates, nothing more than that. (*Beat.*) You said you were very aware that you were gay when you were here.

**RICHARD.** Uh huh. Why do you think I went out for the swim team? How else was I going to see Sam Collier practically naked?

**JEFF.** Sam Collier...

**RICHARD.** The body of Adonis, the face of an angel, and unbearably shy. Hardly said a word in class, never joined in the bull sessions, practically invisible. And yet when he stood on the starting block in that Speedo... (*Beat as he remembers.*) Oh, I had it bad for him.

**JEFF.** Of course, you never told him.

**RICHARD.** Oh, God no. I didn't really come out until senior year in high school when I took my boyfriend Joel to the prom. My school was so into promoting diversity that they basically bribed us into doing it.

**JEFF.** Bribed?

**RICHARD.** They paid for the limo and the tuxes. We tried to get them to pick up the tab for the night at the Holiday Inn, but they said that was a bridge too far.

**JEFF.** So, you had a long-term relationship.

**RICHARD.** Not with Joel. He went his way, I went mine. But in college I met Adam, and we were together for fifteen years.

**JEFF.** But it's over now.

**RICHARD.** He died last summer.

**JEFF.** Oh, damn, Richard, I'm sorry.

**RICHARD.** Thank you. We'd separated a few years before. It's all... (*Richard pulls out another drawer. It is broken; the bottom is falling out. He pulls it out and puts it on top, and begins to take it apart.*) Look at this. It's falling apart.

**JEFF.** It's been here since we were here.

**RICHARD.** I remember. (*Richard pulls out the other drawer, which is also fragile. Jeff goes over to one of the entry arches.*)

**JEFF.** So, where is he?

**RICHARD.** Nothing to be done.

**JEFF.** What?

**RICHARD.** Sorry, occupational hazard. "Nothing to be done" is the first line of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. He said he would be here as soon as the department chairs meeting was over.

## DARK TWIST

**JEFF.** Who, Godot?

**RICHARD.** Ah, good one.

**JEFF.** He still smokes the same pipe, the same pipe tobacco.

**RICHARD.** Dark Twist.

**JEFF.** Dark Twist?

**RICHARD.** The tobacco. It's called Dark Twist.

**JEFF.** Odd name for a tobacco. (*Beat.*) I thought I was going to pass out when I saw him again. He looks exactly the same, that preserved-in-amber look, not a hair out of place. He still does that little throat-clearing bit when he's trying to sound philosophical. "Ahem." He scares me. I'm glad he's not my department chair.

**RICHARD.** He's dean of faculty now. I knew him long before I came here as a student. He used to run the recreation program up at the lake where we spent our summers. As I grew up, my parents got to know him and St. Edmund's. When it came time to apply, he pulled some strings and got me in. He wasn't too happy that I left after one year. It reflected poorly on him. (*Jeff looks at one of the plaques.*)

**JEFF.** There he is: James Gilman Robertson, Senior Prefect. You must have had an interesting interview last spring.

**RICHARD.** The headmaster did it. But he must have had a say in hiring me, though. He wrote me after the contracts were sent out. Very nice but very distant; his signature looked like he didn't like touching the paper.

**JEFF.** He was very nice at the party last night.

**RICHARD.** Oh, he always is, come to think of it. He insisted I call him Jim now. "We're colleagues." And always in control. In all the years you were here, did you ever hear him raise his voice in anger?

**JEFF.** No. Maybe that's why he scares me.

**RICHARD.** He is the shining example of what Holy Ned stands for. He is the essence of prep. He'll probably be buried here in his letter sweater with a tin of Dark Twist at his side. (*Richard has taken the drawer apart and laid the pieces on the desk in neat piles.*) Look, it's put together without glue. It's like one of those Chinese puzzles.

**JEFF.** It's an old piece of furniture. (*Richard pulls out another drawer. It is empty and he begins to take it apart.*) What's your best memory of this place?

**RICHARD.** I have none.

**JEFF.** You must. Somewhere.

**RICHARD.** Okay, I suppose.

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**JEFF.** What, then?

**RICHARD.** Sleeping.

**JEFF.** Why?

**RICHARD.** Because I was away from here. I can still remember some of the dreams I had. I would be home with friends or even back at my old school. I recalled those dreams as a way finding new dreams. I used to write them down. A couple of months ago I came across the journal we used to keep for English class. We were supposed to write down our thoughts, anything, really. After reading some of the entries, I almost cancelled the contract.

**JEFF.** What was so horrible?

**RICHARD.** That's just it; it wasn't the terror; it was the sameness. Waking up each morning was drudgery, and going through the daily grind was torture. Ah, but sleep. It was my escape, and I cherished every moment, every chance, and the dreams, even if I didn't remember them, were a way to someplace else. On Saturdays I could actually leave the campus and wander down to the little village and poke through the shops. (*Assumes a down-East accent.*) I even took on a local accent so folks wouldn't think I was from someplace else, ayah. (*Back to normal voice.*) But in town I would be away from here. But every time, around the corner would come a herd of guys from here, and the spell was broken. I was Little Dickie and the world would tighten up and I had to find some other means of escape.

**JEFF.** If it wasn't you, it was someone else.

**RICHARD.** I'm sure they did after I left. (*Beat.*)

**JEFF.** Yes. You never broke any of the rules. You never smoked or drank or got stoned.

**RICHARD.** Are you kidding? I didn't even jerk off. Well, not a lot. I just broke one rule and it had nothing to do with cigarettes or liquor or controlled substances.

**JEFF.** What rule?

**RICHARD.** I was from Ohio.

**JEFF.** Well, then, maybe it was good you left, then. You wouldn't have been pulled in.

**RICHARD.** Uh, we have pot in Ohio.

**JEFF.** But at the concentration here? I doubt it. My last two years I was constantly high. So, if you didn't do any of the diversions, what did you do when you weren't sleeping or wandering through the village?

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**RICHARD.** I inherited my dad's vinyl collection of classic rock albums from the 1960's. Every album by the Beatles, the Stones, the Who; you name it, I had it, and I played it. Simon and Garfunkel. Jefferson Airplane. This place ruined Sergeant Pepper's for me. I can't hear it without thinking of living in Ankrom Hall. It took me a whole year after I went home to purge the stench of stale piss and dust-encrusted dormitory floor wax from the sense memory of listening to the White Album.

**JEFF.** What was it like going back home? (*Richard has now disassembled the second drawer and neatly stacked the pieces. He looks at the other drawers.*)

**RICHARD.** Like I never left. My old friends were still there. They said nothing about me being gone; it was like they knew what I went through. I had to go to summer school to make up for flunking out of here, but it was worth it. That summer I took drivers ed, got my license, and got a cherry-red used Mustang convertible. My grades were good, I made friends with the teachers, I lettered three years on the swim team, and gave the graduation speech for my class. I even got involved in political activism.

**JEFF.** (*Impressed.*) Wow. You really blossomed.

**RICHARD.** Well, I can't take all the credit. That was Joel.

**JEFF.** How did you meet?

**RICHARD.** He'd joined my class the year I was here. When I got back, he was pretty much the focal point of social activism for the whole school. He signed me up to work on a local campaign the first day of school as well as recruit me for the swim team.

**JEFF.** Sounds like a real mover and shaker.

**RICHARD.** Well, it didn't hurt that he was handsome, a great smile, and had this muscular swagger that generated an air of utmost confidence without being an asshole about it.

**JEFF.** Unlike so many of the guys here.

**RICHARD.** Exactly.

**JEFF.** So, you started seeing each other...?

**RICHARD.** Oh, God, no. I had no idea he was gay, and I sure didn't tell him I was. We were just best buddies.

**JEFF.** So, how did you end up as boyfriends?

**RICHARD.** He got me a job the next summer working with this day camp program for special-needs kids called Camp Able. We were swim coaches

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together. When it was over in August, there was a picnic for the staff, and afterward he and I walked home. When we got to his house, he gave me a hug and said thanks for everything this summer, and...

**JEFF.** And...?

**RICHARD.** He kissed me, and I kissed him back, and... (*Beat as he remembers the moment fondly.*) Anyway. That would never have happened here.

**JEFF.** You don't know that.

**RICHARD.** Yeah, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have had a Mustang convertible or a boyfriend if I'd stuck around.

**JEFF.** Probably not. But you must have some good memories of this place. It wasn't all hell. (*Beat.*)

**RICHARD.** No. It wasn't.

**JEFF.** Good.

**RICHARD.** I learned a few things about myself.

**JEFF.** Such as?

**RICHARD.** I could write. Pretty good at it, too.

**JEFF.** Okay, good.

**RICHARD.** I am gay. I mean, I knew it before I knew about all the sex, but here it was pretty much locked in.

**JEFF.** At least you admitted it.

**RICHARD.** And I knew that if I could survive here, I could make it just about anywhere.

**JEFF.** As the saying goes, that which does not kill you...

**RICHARD.** Yeah, well. (*Beat.*) So, what's your best memory of here? (*Beat as Jeff mulls it over.*)

**JEFF.** I lost my virginity here.

**RICHARD.** Now we're getting somewhere. How?

**JEFF.** That's private.

**RICHARD.** Ah, no. Play by the rules. You brought it up, you spill those guts.

**JEFF.** Rules? This is some sort of game all of a sudden?

**RICHARD.** Sure, why not? To Tell the Truth. We ask each other questions and promise not to hold anything back.

**JEFF.** What if we do?

**RICHARD.** Oh, for Christ's sake. All right. Remember when we got here, like the first day, we had to sign a piece of paper that said we would not lie, cheat, or

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plagiarize, and that any work we did was honest and true and loyal and all that stuff?

**JEFF.** The Pledge. We had to write “Pledge” on every piece we submitted.

**RICHARD.** It’s still in force.

**JEFF.** Oh, come on.

**RICHARD.** What are you afraid of?

**JEFF.** Nothing.

**RICHARD.** Then pledge.

**JEFF.** I don’t want to play this game.

**RICHARD.** You started it.

**JEFF.** Then I can stop it.

**RICHARD.** Pledge.

**JEFF.** C’mon, let’s talk about something else.

**RICHARD.** Pledge.

**JEFF.** Where the hell is Jim?

**RICHARD.** Jeff. Pledge.

**JEFF.** Fuck you. (*Jeff starts to leave but Richard jumps in front of him, blocking his way and waving a piece of one of the drawers at him like a sword.*)

**RICHARD.** Pledge.

**JEFF.** Fine. Pledge.

**RICHARD.** Let’s have it. How’d you lose it?

**JEFF.** I had sex.

**RICHARD.** Ah, good one. Who with?

**JEFF.** One question at a time. Now I ask you.

**RICHARD.** Says who?

**JEFF.** If you can make up rules, so can I.

**RICHARD.** Fair enough.

**JEFF.** So, how’d you lose yours? Wait, let me guess. Joel.

**RICHARD.** Well, if you already know, what’s the point of me telling you?

**JEFF.** I want to hear how.

**RICHARD.** Seriously?

**JEFF.** The question was “how’d you lose it.” You’ve already stipulated to the “who.”

**RICHARD.** You should have gone to law school. Okay. It was a beautiful June evening on a bank by a gently-flowing stream beside a field. We brought a blanket,

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we sipped some wine, and began to kiss and make slow and gentle love. I can still hear the water in the brook and see the full moon rising over a distant stand of elm trees.

**JEFF.** Wow, that's romantic.

**RICHARD.** Yeah, the scent of new-mown hay gets me hard every time. Okay, your turn.

**JEFF.** At least you had a view. Mine was in the laundry room.

**RICHARD.** The laundry room here?

**JEFF.** Yep.

**RICHARD.** Who was it?

**JEFF.** Um...

**RICHARD.** Hey, I told you mine. Was it a guy?

**JEFF.** Yes.

**RICHARD.** Now we're getting somewhere. Who?

**JEFF.** Guess.

**RICHARD.** Oh, c'mon. Give me a hint.

**JEFF.** No hints.

**RICHARD.** Just one. That's my new rule.

**JEFF.** Oh, all right. His name has already been mentioned.

**RICHARD.** *(To himself as he thinks.)* His name has already been mentioned. Not Jim...

**JEFF.** No. God, no. *(Richard looks around the room and sees that Jeff is looking at the plaque with Robert Deacon Alexander's name on it. The light comes on.)*

**RICHARD.** Deke Alexander?

**JEFF.** *(A whisper.)* Yes.

**RICHARD.** Jesus. Screwing the senior prefect in the laundry room. Whose idea was it?

**JEFF.** You had your one question.

**RICHARD.** No, no, no. C'mon. Whose idea was it?

**JEFF.** His. Mine. Both of us. Around Thanksgiving we were both down there doing our laundry. He showed me his underwear with all these cum stains on them. He said he got them because he was always shooting off, and he wanted to see if I had the same thing on mine, and next thing I know we're on the floor doing it on some ratty old sheet...

**RICHARD.** Wow.

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**JEFF.** Sorry it wasn't all romantic like you and Joel on the grassy river bank like something out of E.M. Forster.

**RICHARD.** Joel and I did it in the wayback of his dad's SUV. We fucked like two horny teenagers because that's what we were. And so were you and Deke.

**JEFF.** You lied about the grassy bank. You broke the pledge.

**RICHARD.** No, we started out on the grassy bank. Mosquitos were eating us alive, so we got in the Suburban. So, why Deke? I mean, he was good-looking and all, but –

**JEFF.** With him I was protected. Nobody would pick on me like they did you.

**RICHARD.** You were his bitch.

**JEFF.** Today they call it friends with benefits.

**RICHARD.** It was more than just that once.

**JEFF.** The rest of the year. Mainly in his dorm room – the senior prefect had a suite all to himself – but every now and then we got adventurous, like in the gym shower or that empty apartment on the third floor of Ankrom.

**RICHARD.** Jesus.

**JEFF.** It's easy for you to judge, Rich.

**RICHARD.** No, maybe I should have tried it myself. God knows what I went through was worse than getting fucked by a senior. Okay, fair is fair. Ask me anything. Pledge. And I mean it this time.

**JEFF.** What broke you?

**RICHARD.** You mean what made me determined not to come back after freshman year?

**JEFF.** Yes. What was the one thing that sealed it?

**RICHARD.** It wasn't just one thing. It was like a snow field on the side of a mountain. One flake at a time, building up, collecting, coalescing, slowly, until it was piled deep enough that all it took was one more flake and .... Avalanche.

**JEFF.** What were the snowflakes?

**RICHARD.** A million of them, starting with the fact that I didn't want to be here in the first place. It wasn't my idea, but since my brother and sister loved being shipped off to boarding school at fourteen, naturally my parents thought I would too. I was homesick, I was alone, the weather sucked, and of course the bullying. I was the victim of a thousand practical jokes, including the old favorites like water balloons and short-sheeted beds and opening my window in the middle of a snowstorm so I slept on wet sheets and snowdrifts.



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**JEFF.** And you did nothing?

**RICHARD.** To react would have been to lose.

**JEFF.** But you did react. Once.

**RICHARD.** Oh, you remember that.

**JEFF.** Chris Martin.

**RICHARD.** Chris Martin. Yeah, that was it. You were there. It was a nice spring day – the first after that solid gray winter – and a bunch of guys were playing stickball out on the quad. I was on my way to the library. Chris threw the tennis ball and caught me on the back of the head. Everybody laughed because they knew that I would do nothing. For a split second I thought I would do nothing, just keep on walking. But in that split second, the universe shifted. I turned around, picked up the ball, and walked up to him. He had this maddening little smirk on his face, made all the more gross by the cookie crumbs stuck in his braces. He held out his hand and said, “Gimme the ball, Dickie.” I smiled, then punched him in the mouth, knocked him down, and to the great surprise of everyone, including me, I beat the ever-loving shit out of him. Unfortunately, Jim – Mr. Robertson – was walking across the quad and saw the whole thing. I spent the next week in detention. I lost.

**JEFF.** Chris lost too. He needed a whole new set of braces.

**RICHARD.** If anything, he came out ahead. Since I was the one who started the fight, I was the bully, not him. Oh, I hated myself for reacting.

**JEFF.** So, that was it. The tennis ball was the last snowflake.

**RICHARD.** The week in detention was a blessing. School-sanctioned isolation.

**JEFF.** And that was the last we ever saw of you.

**RICHARD.** From then on to the end of the year I was left alone, and when I got on that bus to the airport on June eighth, I never looked back.

**JEFF.** Your parents didn't try to talk you into staying?

**RICHARD.** No, the shrink they sent me to after I got home said it wasn't a good idea. I had already...*(Beat.)*

**JEFF.** You had already what?

**RICHARD.** Take a guess. *(Beat.)*

**JEFF.** Pills? Razor blades?

**RICHARD.** Dunbridge Road is a five-mile straightaway south of my hometown that ends rather abruptly at a cornfield. I was heading towards that cornfield at a hundred miles an hour in the Mustang. Fortunately, the engine blew out before I got there.

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**JEFF.** I'm sorry.

**RICHARD.** That the engine blew out?

**JEFF.** No, that you tried to get there. But you didn't try again.

**RICHARD.** I'm here, aren't I? No, I had a choice. I made it, and I lived with it. So did you. I watched you, Jeff. You made your choice, too. But instead of standing up for yourself, you rented out your dignity on the laundry room floor. So, how many freshmen were you screwing when you were the Senior Prefect?

**JEFF.** Oh, crap.

**RICHARD.** That many, huh? (*Beat.*) Better luck this time. All right. My turn.

**JEFF.** I don't want to play anymore.

**RICHARD.** Okay, no pledge. Just a question.

**JEFF.** What is it.

**RICHARD.** You knew you were gay, and yet you still got married. Why?

**JEFF.** I really loved her.

**RICHARD.** But –

**JEFF.** And I wasn't really sure.

**RICHARD.** Really.

**JEFF.** Look, no one's one hundred percent straight or gay.

**RICHARD.** Did you ever see Liberace?

**JEFF.** You know what I mean.

**RICHARD.** Yes, I do. I get it. But you got married. Why? Family pressure? Religion? It's not like it's a stigma anymore. Hell, St. Edmund's has a diversity clause that makes discrimination based on sexual orientation a terminal offense for both staff and students. I'm surprised we both weren't greeted with candy and a Chippendales stripper. It's nothing to hide from anymore.

**JEFF.** But it's not something to parade around with, either.

**RICHARD.** Oh, I really need to take you to Key West sometime.

**JEFF.** It's not for everyone. Not me.

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